United Nations E/CN.3/2012/14

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
20 December 2011

Original: English

Statistical Commission
Forty-third session
28 February-2 March 2012
Item 3 (k) of the provisional agenda*
Items for discussion and decision: implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its forty-second session (E/2011/24, chap. I.A), the Commission will have before it a brief progress report on the work of the Friends of the Chair group on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. The initial focus of the group is to revise and update the language of the preamble of the Fundamental Principles. The group has also elaborated a detailed time plan for 2012, including a review of the implementation of the Fundamental Principles by Member States and the development of a practical guide for their implementation. The Commission is asked to review the proposal for an updated preamble and to comment on the workplan of the Friends of the Chair group.

* E/CN.3/2012/1.

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I. Introduction

1. At its forty-second session, in 2011, the Statistical Commission discussed the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (see E/2011/24, chap. II.K; see also E/CN.3/2011/17). This discussion also benefited from the in-depth exchange of views among senior official statisticians during a high-level forum, held on 21 February 2011, on the topic "Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics: threats and responses". Several keynote speakers introduced the various principles and discussed the challenges related to their implementation. Furthermore, there was an open debate on possible ways to support improved implementation of the Fundamental Principles.[1]

2. In its decision 42/111, the Commission acknowledged that the Fundamental Principles were still as relevant today as they have been in the past and that no revision of the 10 principles themselves was currently necessary. It recommended, however, that the United Nations Statistics Division facilitate the formation of a Friends of the Chair group to revise and update the language of the preamble of the Fundamental Principles in order to take into account new developments since the time when the Principles were first formulated, to assess how they can be re-enforced, and to develop a practical guide for the implementation of the Principles to include new developments and good practices by national statistical offices, other producers and users of statistics. The Commission recommended that the Friends of the Chair group complete its work in full consultation with Member States and report to the Commission before 2014,[2] in time for the twentieth anniversary of the Fundamental Principles (see E/2011/24, chap. I.B).

3. In the same discussion, the Commission also asked the Statistics Division to work with the regional commissions and other relevant organizations on a programme to undertake a review of the implementation of the Principles, to provide support to Member States as they implement the Principles and to promote the Principles, leading up to an endorsement of the Fundamental Principles by the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly before 2014.

II. Establishment of the Friends of the Chair and proposed timetable for 2012

A. Members of the Friends of the Chair group

4. The Friends of the Chair on Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics was constituted in September 2011, comprising senior statisticians from the following 12 countries: Australia, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United Republic of Tanzania and the United States of America. The Statistical Offices of the European Communities and of the Economic Commission for Europe were invited to serve as observers. Katherine Wallman

[1] See http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/statcom_2011/Seminars/High_level_forum/default.html.

[2] A detailed timetable leading up to the completion of the work of the Friends of the Chair group by the time of the 2013 Statistical Commission is included in section II of the present report.

(United States) agreed to serve as the Leader of the group, with the Statistics Division acting as the secretariat.

B. Programme of work

5. The Friends of the Chair on Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics initiated its work via e-mail exchanges and, in accordance with the decision of the Statistical Commission, identified the following specific deliverables:

(a) A revision of the preamble of the Fundamental Principles;

(b) An assessment of how the Fundamental Principles can be re-enforced;

(c) The development of a practical guide for the implementation of the Fundamental Principles;

(d) A review of the implementation of the Fundamental Principles by Member States;

(e) Support to Member States as they implement the Principles;

(f) A comprehensive report on all activities to the Commission before 2014;

(g) Submission of the Fundamental Principles with a revised preamble to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly.

6. The Friends of the Chair group agreed that the initial focus of its work would be on the revision of the preamble (see sect. III below) as well as on the review of the implementation of the Fundamental Principles. This review would take account of available analyses already conducted by the regional commissions and other relevant organizations as well as a questionnaire for self-assessment to be sent to all Member States. The discussion on how the principles can be re-enforced and what practical guides can be developed to assist countries will then benefit from the results of the review exercise. The task of supporting Member States in the implementation of the Fundamental Principles is considered to be an ongoing task, which will build on existing instruments, such as the *Handbook of Statistical Organization*[3] and the country practices database on the Statistics Division website, providing reference material from Member States that is relevant in the context of implementing the Fundamental Principles. With regard to the submission of the Fundamental Principles to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly for endorsement, it is noteworthy that this will require a considerable concerted effort. In particular, national statistical agencies will have to make an effort to reach out to their respective representatives in the Council and the Assembly in order to generate sufficient support for the endorsement of the Fundamental Principles at these political levels.

7. Based on the reflections above, the following approximate time plan was proposed by the secretariat and supported by a consensus of the Friends of the Chair:

[3] *Handbook of Statistical Organization, Third Edition: The Operation and Organization of a Statistical Agency* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.XVII.7).

First quarter 2012

- Consultation of the Friends of the Chair on a revised preamble
- The Statistical Commission to review the revised preamble
- The Statistics Division, in cooperation with regional partners, to send a questionnaire on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles to Member States

Second quarter 2012

- The Friends of the Chair to finalize the revised preamble based on guidance from the Statistical Commission
- The Statistics Division to analyse the results of the implementation survey and report to the Friends of the Chair
- The Friends of the Chair to initiate discussion on how the principles can be reinforced and on a practical guide for their implementation

Third quarter 2012

- The Friends of the Chair to finalize the documents on how to re-enforce the Fundamental Principles and the practical implementation guide, taking into account inputs from a global consultation exercise

Fourth quarter 2012

- Preparation of the comprehensive report to the Statistical Commission in 2013 (the Friends of the Chair supported by the Statistics Division)

First quarter 2013

- The Statistical Commission to review the work of the Friends of the Chair on Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and to adopt a resolution requesting the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly to endorse the Fundamental Principles

Third quarter 2013

- The Economic and Social Council to endorse the Fundamental Principles with a revised preamble

Fourth quarter 2013

- The General Assembly to endorse the Fundamental Principles with a revised preamble

First quarter 2014

- The Statistical Commission celebrates the twentieth anniversary of the Fundamental Principles

8. In order for the work of the Friends of the Chair to be based on a broad spectrum of views, it is beneficial that its efforts are accompanied by an active continued dialogue among Member States at all levels. Opportunities for this will be

offered at the relevant topical and/or regional meetings, such as the plenary seminar of the Conference of European Statisticians, in June 2012, or the International Association for Official Statistics Conference on the theme "Getting our message across: strategies and best practices to ensure the use of statistics in decision-making", to be held in Kiev in September 2012.

III. Revision of the preamble

9. The Commission had invited the Friends of the Chair to revise and update the language of the preamble of the Fundamental Principles in order to take into account new developments since the time when the Principles were first formulated.[4] At the time of the writing of the present report, the Friends of the Chair group has conducted a first round of discussion on the issues that are proposed to be included in a revised and extended preamble. A large number of members of the Friends of the Chair group contributed to the discussion. The following reflects, although not in an exhaustive manner, some of the proposed elements to be included in the revised preamble:

(a) Evoking the key purpose of the production of official statistics, namely supporting development policy and analysis in its most comprehensive notion, introducing explicitly new aspects such as sustainable development, peace and security and so forth; in this context, referring to the increased use of official data for informed decision-making and monitoring;

(b) Evoking the importance of national, regional and global information systems in an increasingly globalized world; referring in this context to the increased role and responsibility of international and supranational statistical organizations;

(c) Recognizing the largely increased technological possibilities (Internet) — and related responsibilities — of disseminating data to a largely increased and more sophisticated audience and the improved possibilities to actually engage in communication with diverse user groups (for example, through social networking);

(d) Referring to the continuous evolution of scientific methods and the increased availability of new data sources (administrative data) and new data types (geo-referenced information) and in this context, stressing the importance of a sustained process of statistical capacity-building;

(e) Recognizing the increasingly competitive context from non-official data providers and its impact on the official statistical system;

(f) Stating a strong commitment to an expanded notion of quality and quality management based on an effective relationship between data providers, data producers and users;

(g) Emphasizing the essential notions of trust and credibility and in this context, promoting statistical culture;

[4] For the current version of the preamble, see http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/statorg/FP-English.htm.

(h) Stating the broad ambition of the Fundamental Principles, that is, in order to be effective, the Principles have to be endorsed and respected at the highest political level and by all stakeholders of the statistical process.

10. Based on these and other proposals, the Friends of the Chair will formulate a concrete proposal for a revised preamble, which will be submitted to the Statistical Commission for review in a background document. The Commission will also receive an oral update on the work of the Friends of the Chair from the Leader of the group.

IV. Points for discussion

11. **The Commission is invited to review the proposal for an updated preamble and to comment on the workplan of the Friends of the Chair group.**